DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 103 CS 006 494

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TITLE The Functions of Reading in Four Elementary Classrooms and Their Effects on Children's Reading Interests.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 22p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Environment; Content Area Reading; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; *Independent Reading; Literature Appreciation; Longitudinal Studies; Oral Reading; Reading Aloud to Others; Reading Habits; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Interests; *Reading Research; Recreational Reading; *Student Motivation; Student Teacher Relationship; *Teacher Influence

ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study examined the classroom environments in which 30 children learned to read. Over the first four years of the study, data were collected on how the children's third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers taught reading and other subjects, the kinds and numbers of books that the children had available to read, the functions of reading in the classrooms, and the connections made between assigned reading and literature. During the study, the children kept records of what they read and answered questions about how they heard about these books and what they thought of each book. The results showed that teachers were most successful in fostering reading interests when they gave children time to read, used literature to teach reading, or read aloud regularly to their classes. The positive effect of sharing books in class was evident in the children's reports of how they got information about books and in the examination of reading by one child, whose preference for fantasy was first triggered and later fostered by oral readings in successive classes. By calling attention to specific books in one way or another, the teachers were able to establish climates in which reading became a significant activity valued by the social community of the classroom in general. (RL)

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# The Functions of Reading in Four Elementary Classrooms and Their Effects on Children's Reading Interests

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The Functions of Reading in Four Elementary Classrooms
And Their Effects on Children's Reading Interests

In the past, while many in reading research have studied the reading process, achievement, testing, the pros and cons of top-down/ bottom up methods of teaching reading, few have addressed themselves to reading interests. The few who have done so tell us little about how the classroom community affects the reading children do.

Norvell's 1974 study[1] is typical. He asked a very large (4,993) group of children to fill out questionnaires, select a list of titles and then tell what they thought of each book (very interesting, fairly interesting, uninteresting.). After careful analysis of his data, Norvell then made statements about the most popular books at different grade levels. For instance,

> 60% of the boys in grades 7 through 9 said that Wind in the Willows was their favorite and 70% of the girls.

There are several problems with a statistical approach like Norvell's. Children's favorite books are ephemeral. Many change from year to year. A book which is of high interest this year may not capture anyone's attention in five years. During the 1970's, for example, adolescents were captivated by Go Ask Alice[2]. Today, while some continue to read it, the book is not very popular. We,therefore,only know the favorite books of Norvell's children for 1974, not for any other year.

In addition, Norvell and others that tabulate interests do not tell us anything about what influenced the child to read a given book or what kinds of books a child is likely to read over a given period of time. Did the reader pick up the

book accidentally? Did someone tell him about it? Did the child learn about the book from a movie or television show? What happens in a class to rouse interest in books? How can teachers establish a climate in which children become eager readers?

With these and other questions, in 1978, the author began a longitudinal study of thirty children and their reading. The researcher reasoned that a classroom is a community and the children in it are members of that social setting. Specifically, the objectives were to look at the classroom in which children learn to read, find out how teachers teach reading and other subjects, the kinds and numbers of books which children have available to them, the functions of reading in the class, connections made between assigned reading and literature. The author's intention was also to find out what children read and to map their reading interests as they changed, keeping a running record of the children's responses to books they read. Ethnographic research techniques and case study methods were combined to meet these objectives. Much of that data is not yet analyzed, but one facet has been studied so far, the functions of reading during the four years of the study and the effects of classroom methods on children. We turn to that now.

Functions of Reading in the Four Classes

In all four classes observed to date, the children were asked to read to improve literacy, but the teachers taught literacy

in a variety of ways. The third grade teacher taught reading exclusively from a series of basal readers, dividing the children into four groups arranged according to reading ability. Her emphasis was on building reading skills which she considered necessary before the children would be able to read independently.

The fourth grade teacher also used four groups to teach reading but combined basals with trade books. The class as a whole read twenty trade books during the year, each group reading perhaps five or six. Many of the twenty books were first read aloud to the whole class by the teacher and then small groups reread them. Three times during the year individual reading groups turned to books in the basals, but not much emphasis, either in the trade or text books, was placed on the development of reading skills.

In the fifth grade, the teacher taught the same group literacy from basals most of the time, but the class also spent some time reading several novels together. Emphasis was always on reading for inference and critical reading in large group discussions. In individual sessions children received help in areas of reading in which they were having some difficulty.

The sixth grade teacher did not use basal readers at all, preferring to use children's literature, instead. He placed most teaching effort on improving speed in reading in a variety of literary genre. Selected children received additional help in reading skills from a reading support teacher. Thus, all four teachers shared a single objective, but each one emphasized

different aspects of reading and used different reading materials.

In both fifth and sixth grades the teachers made a marked effort to teach current events from newspapers and magazines. Both teachers employed a game to achieve this objective, thereby developing some competition within the class. Throughout the year, the children read news from many sources, national news magazines and local papers, in particular. Each child was expected to hand in questions to each teacher during the week. Every Friday both classes were divided into two groups and competed in a contest, answering questions which they had earlier given to their teacher. In both classes, therefore, reading was used to help children become acquainted with the news media.

Throughout the grades children read textbooks for social studies, science and math, but only in two classes was reading used as a vehicle to introduce children to books as literature. Activities took a number of forms, but reading aloud, assigning reading to groups, asking questions and talking about books were features of both classes. In the two remaining classes little attention was given to literature as such.

The third grade teacher did not read many books to her children (3) and did not discuss the books. As mentioned above, she used basals to teach reading. Although the stories in the basals frequently were short selections from non-text or trade books, no connection was made between the two kinds of books. When a story in a basal had been taken from a trade book, the teacher made no attempt to help the children find the book

from which the basal story had been taken. Her emphasis in teaching was always on developing skills in reading rather than on literature.

The fourth and fifth grade teachers did discuss literature with their classes and with individuals. In discussions with his class the fourth grade teacher always asked questions about the elements of stories, for example:

> What is the setting?
> Who are the main characters?
> Tell me the plot until now?

Similarly, the fifth grade teacher talked considerably about the books which children and she shared. Often the emphasis was on reading critically. At other times the children wrote or dramatized stories in response to literature. After she read Wrinkle in Time, [3] the fifth grade teacher asked the children to write their own space stories and then told the group about other books by the same author. Both teachers read many books aloud to their classes and asked the children to dramatize them, twenty six in the fourth and fifteen in the fifth grade.

By way of contrast, the sixth grade teacher did not read aloud or discuss any books with his class. Although the children were continually reading books which they selected themselves, the teacher never discussed the books which they were reading.

In the case of literature, then, the teachers did not share the same objectives. Some thought the subject should be taught at a later date. Others viewed it as a vehicle for teaching reading, or as a personal, pleasurable experience

which need not be taught at the elementary level. Still others thought of literature as an important experience for children, one which needed classroom guidance. Clearly in the school where this observational study took place there was no clearly defined literature program designed for the school as a whole.

Finally, all of the children read for pleasure in all of the classes. Each of the teachers put aside at least half an hour once a week for everyone in the class to read anything they selected themselves. The children always had many additional moments when they could read whatever they chose. All the teachers maintained small classroom libraries, in addition to a large (6,000 books) school library and a good sized public library. All the teachers, therefore, gave the children time to read and made books accessible in a variety of ways.

The functions of reading in the four classes may be seen in the table which follows:

## The Functions of Reading in Grades Three through Six

| Functions of Reading | Grade Three | Grade Four | Grade Five | Grade Six |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| To improve literacy | * | * | * | * |
| To read current events in newspapers and magazines | | | * | * |
| To read textbooks for traditional school subjects (social studies, language arts, science) | * | * | * | * |
| To teach literature through oral reading by teacher, group reading in class. | | * | * | |
| To read for pleasure | * | * | * | * |

Reading Interests

How did teaching practices affect the children's reading? To answer this question and others, every year since the study began the children were asked to keep a record of everything they read. Then, during interviews the children were asked how they heard about the books they read and what they thought of each book.

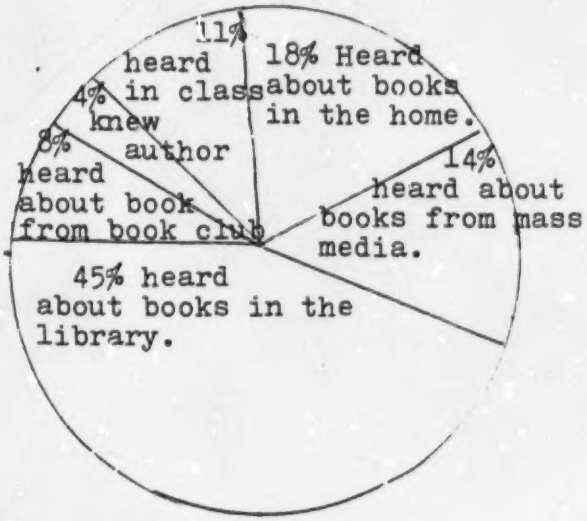
Their answers revealed that only a few classroom activities affected reading interests. For instance, none of the children reported either reading a basal reader or textbook on his own or reading a book after he had heard about it in a textbook. Basal readers and textbooks were clearly not an impetus to further reading in other forms of literature.

Only a small number of children reported reading newspapers or magazines for recreation, even in those classes where the current events game was played. News never became a popular form of recreational reading among the children in this study.

The great majority of the children preferred to read literature, usually fiction. Most chose modern realistic fiction, while a smaller number preferred fantasies. Hardly anyone read historical fiction, except when assigned. A few were interested in informational books, but none of the children read biography or poetry, except when assigned.

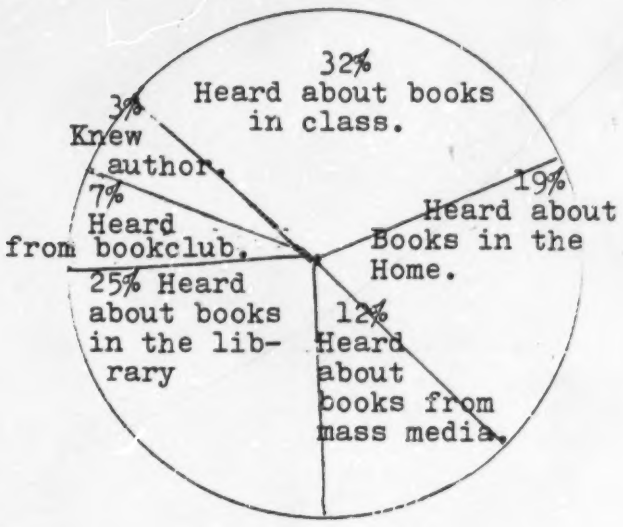
When asked how they heard about the books they had read, the children's answers indicated that they were most affected by teachers who used reading to introduce literature, who read aloud in class and who talked about books with individuals or groups of children. Their answers are shown graphically in

the displays which follow:


11% heard in class
18% Heard about books in the home.
4% knew author
8% heard about book from book club
14% heard about books from mass media.
45% heard about books in the library.

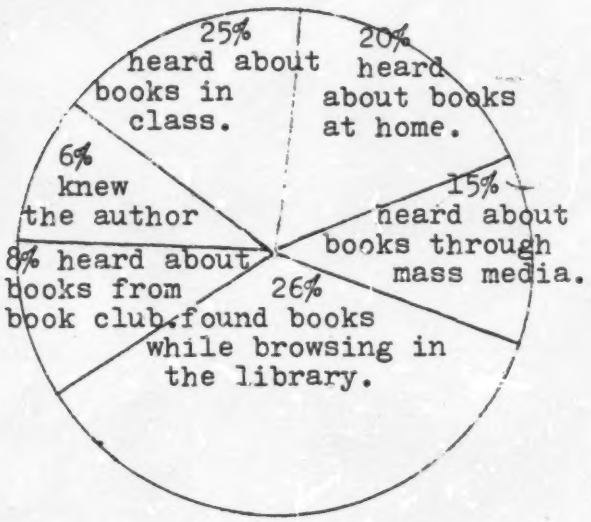
Grade Three

Sources from Which Children Heard about books


32% Heard about books in class.
3% Knew author.
7% Heard from bookclub.
19% Heard about Books in the Home.
25% Heard about books in the library
12% Heard about books from mass media.

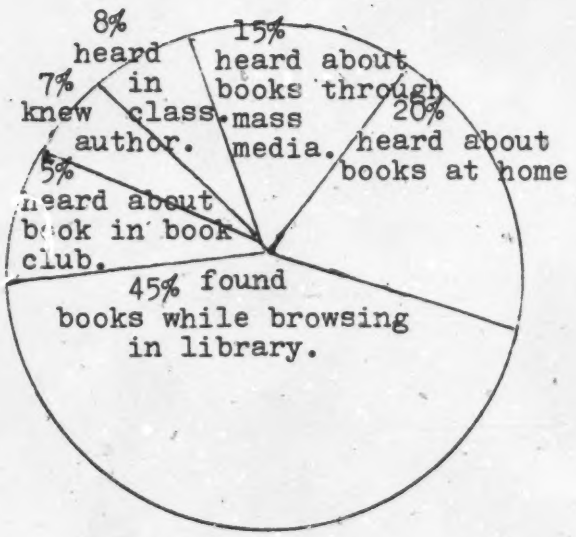
Grade Four

Sources from Which Children Heard about books.


25% heard about books in class.
20% heard about books at home.
6% knew the author
15% heard about books through mass media.
8% heard about books from book club.
26% found books while browsing in the library.

Grade Five

Sources from Which Children Heard about Books


8% heard in class.
15% heard about books through mass media.
7% knew author.
20% heard about books at home
5% heard about book in book club.
45% found books while browsing in library.

Grade Six

Sources from Which Children Heard about Books

In all four classes the children heard about books from their homes, the mass media and book clubs at approximately the same rate throughout the four years. In some classes, however, teachers were more influential than in others in guiding the children's reading, for instance,in the fourth and fifth grades. In the third and sixth grades the children turned to library shelves for information and ideas about books to read more frequently than they turned to their teachers. In other words, where teachers read aloud, talked about books, assigned children to read novels in groups, in short, taught literature either as an entertainment or as part of the reading program, the children were more likely to read books which adults suggested.

The same trends are noticeable when one looks at the reading done by individual children. Below is a list of books which Carey read during the four years of the study. Her choices, first of all, show that she was influenced by active and inactive literature programs. She read more books in the fourth and fifth grades than she did in the third and sixth. She reported reading eight books in the third grade and ten in the sixth grade. She reported reading eighteen and twenty in the fifth and sixth. Clearly a climate in which people talked about books made Carey more interested in reading.

In the fourth and fifth grades she also heard about titles from her teachers more frequently than she did in the third and sixth grades. She learned about books from her teacher

once in the third grade, eight times in the fourth grade, ten times in the fifth grade and not at all in the sixth grade. In other words, Carey was interested in reading the books which her teachers mentioned to her. This was true even when the teacher first read a book aloud. Carey read seven books which her fourth grade teacher read to the class and nine books which the fifth grade teacher first read aloud. The teachers not only influenced how much but also what Carey read.

Some of the books which Carey read at the suggestion of her teachers led intc long-term reading interests. She first heard about Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH[4] and Alice in Wonderland[5] from her fourth grade teacher. Her fifth grade teacher later introduced her to Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring[6] and several Alexander stories. Carey's reading interests were triggered and nurtured when teachers shared fantasy in class. Eventually, Carey began to look for fantasies on her own.

Of some interest, also is the difference between the books which Carey obtained on her own and those which she learned about through her teachers. The researcher found reviews in the Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, Horn Book Magazine and School Library Journal wherever possible and then assigned the titles numerical scores as suggested by the reviewers. Those deemed excellent by the reviewers were given a score of "4". Good books,in the opinion of the reviewers, were given a score of "3". Books which the reviewers thought of moderate quality were given a "2", and poor books were given a score of "1". When reviews were not available, the researcher evaluated them.

In general, the books which teachers recommended tended to be of high quality as measured by the three book review magazines. Books recommended by the teachers had an average score of 3.8 while those which Carey learned about from other sources had an average score of 2.8. The teachers were better informed than Carey and better able to guide her to the best in children's books.

Carey's personal reading is listed below. The first column contains the names of the books which she reported reading on her own during the four years of the observational study. The second column refers to the answer she gave when asked, "How did you hear about the book?". The third column is a numerical rating of the books she read, as suggested by book reviews found in the three standard review magazines listed above. The fourth column lists those books which Carey read aloud and which Carey read on her own.

Key to Symbols Use in Chart on Carey's Personal Reading in the Third through the Sixth Grades

BC-obtained book from book club.
L -found while browsing in the library (classroom, school or public).
C-Learned about a book from teacher.
CF-Learned about a book from a friend in class.
A -Knew the author.
H -Someone at home told her about it.
MM-Heard about a book through mass media(movies, television, magazines)

4 -An excellent book in the opinion of reviewers
3 -A good book in the opinion of reviewers.
2 -A moderate book in the opinion of reviewers.
1 -A poor book in the opinion of reviewers

\+ -The teacher read the book aloud in class.
-2 Reviews not available. Score was assigned by the researcher after reading the books.

## Carey's Personal Reading in the Third through Sixth Grades

| Grade Level | Titles of Books Read | Source of Information | Average Score Based on Reviews | Books Read by Teachers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Third Grade | Udry. What May Jo Wanted. | L | 3 | |
| | Leach. Whistle in the Graveyard. | L | 4 | |
| | Blume. Otherwise Known as Shiela the Great. | C | 3 | |
| | Warner. The Boxcar Children. | L | -2 | |
| | Warner. Snowbound Mystery. | L | -2 | |
| | Lenski Strawberry Girl | L | 4 | |
| | Warner. Mike's Mystery | L | -2 | |
| | Warner. Mystery behind the Wall. | L | -2 | |
| Fourth Grade | Blume. Iggie's House. | C | 3 | + |
| | Blume. Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. | C | 4 | + |
| | Beatty. Matthew Looney and the Space Pirates | L | 2 | |
| | Beatty. Matthew Looney in the Outback | L | 2 | |
| | O'Brien. Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH | C | 4 | + |
| | Fox. The Slave Dancer. | C | 4 | + |
| | Elwood. Horror Tales . | BC | 1 | |
| | Kittelcamp. Haunted Houses. | H | 1 | |
| | Crayden. Ishkabible | L | 1 | |
| | Fitzgerald. Private Eye | L | 3 | |
| | Leach. Whistle in the Graveyard. | A | 4 | |
| | Carroll. Alice in Wonderland. | C | 4 | + |
| | Bonsall. I'll Show You Cats | L | 3 | |
| | Lindgren. Pippi Longstockings. | A | 4 | |
| | Redford. Mary McLeod Bethune. | L | 2 | |
| | Garner. Boys and Girl's Book about Divorce. | L | 2 | |
| | Mann. My Dad Lives in a Downtown Hotel. | C | 3 | + |
| | Adams. Watership Down. | C | 4 | + |

## Carey's Personal Reading in the Third through Sixth Grades

Continued

| Grade Level | Titles of Books Read | Source of Information | Average Score Based on Reviews | Books Read by Teachers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fifth Grade | Grimm. The Juniper Tree. | H | 4 | |
| | Aiken. The Necklace of Raindrops. | C-F | 4 | |
| | Tolkien. Fellowship of the Ring | C | 4 | + |
| | Alexander. The Book of Three | C | 4 | + |
| | Alexander. The Black Cauldron | C | 4 | + |
| | Grahame. The Wind in the Willows | C | 4 | + |
| | Fitzgerald. The Great Brain | C-F | 3 | |
| | Gardner. Dragons,Dragons | C-F | 3 | |
| | Merrill. The Pushcart War. | C | 4 | + |
| | Bombeck. If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, Why Am I in the Pits. | H | 4 | |
| | L'Engle. Swiftly Tilting Planet. | C | 4 | + |
| | L'Engle. A Wind in the Door. | C | 4 | |
| | White. Charlotte's Web | C | 4 | + |
| | Danziger. The Cat Ate My Gymsuit | C-F | 2 | |
| | Blume. Forever. | C-F | 2 | |
| | Lewis. The Last Battle. | C | 4 | |
| | Lewis. Prince Caspian. | C | 4 | + |
| | Carroll.Alice's Adventures through the Looking Glass | A | 4 | |
| | George. My Side of the Mountain. | C | 4 | + |
| | -------The Giant All-Color Book of Fairy Tales | H | -2 | |
| Sixth Grade | Beatty. Matthew Looney and the Comic Circus | A | 2 | |
| | Beatty. Matthew Looney in the Outback | A | 2 | |
| | Jannsen. Comet in Moominland. | H | 3 | |
| | Alexander. Castle of Llyr. | A | 4 | |
| | Anon. Go Ask Alice. | MM | 2 | |
| | Alexander. Taran Wanderer | A | 4 | |
| | O'Dell. Island of the Blue Dolphin | C-F | 4 | |
| | Whitney. The Golden Unicorn. | L | 2 | |
| | Edwards. Mandy | MM | 3 | |
| | Cooper. The Dark Is Rising. | C-F | 4 | |

In summary, this study shows some of the dynamics at work in several classrooms. Teachers were most successful in fostering reading interests when they gave children time to read, used literature to teach reading or regularly read aloud to their classes. The affect of sharing books in class was seen in the way children got information about books and in the reading of one child. Her preference for fantasy was first triggered and later fostered by oral readings in successive classes. During the four years of this study. the child's teachers introduced her to better quality books than those which she learned about on her own.

Reading interests, then are more likely to develop in some classroom social settings than in others because students are affected by the milieu in which they read. Individual students may select books for personal reasons, but they also choose books which they know, which are available to them and which have caught the attention of others in the classroom community. By calling attention one way or another to specific books, the teachers are able to establish climates in which books became significant activities valued by the social community in general.

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